TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

CounterPunch

OCT. 16-31, 2009 ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR VOL. 16, NO. 18

What it Takes to Build a Movement

By Mark Rudd

Since the summer of 2003, I've crisscrossed the country speaking at colleges and theaters and bookstores, first with *The Weather Underground* documentary and, starting in March of this year, with my book, *Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen* (William Morrow, 2009). In discussions with young people, they often tell me, "Nothing anyone does can ever make a difference."

The words still sound strange: it's a phrase I never once heard forty years ago, a sentiment obviously false on its surface. Growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, I – and the rest of the country – knew about the civil rights movement in the South, and what was most evident was that individuals, joining with others, actually were making a difference. The labor movement of the Thirties to the Sixties had improved the lives of millions; the anti-war movement had brought down a sitting president – LBJ, March 1968 – and was actively engaged in stopping the Vietnam War. In the forty years since, the women's movement, gay rights, disability rights, animal rights, and environmental movements have all registered enormous social and political gains. To old new lefties, such as myself, this is all self-evident.

So, why the defeatism? In the absence of knowledge of how these historical movements were built, young people assume that they arose spontaneously, or, perhaps, charismatic leaders suddenly called them into existence. On the third Monday of every January we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. having had a dream; knowledge of the movement itself is lost.

RUDD CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

The Novocaine Effect

Obama and Black America

By Kevin Alexander Gray

"It's like when you go to the dentist, and the man's going to take your tooth. You're going to fight him when he starts pulling. So he squirts some stuff in your jaw called novocaine, to make you think they're not doing anything to you. So you sit there and 'cause you've got all of that novocaine in your jaw, you suffer peacefully. Blood running all down your jaw, and you don't know what's happening. 'Cause someone has taught you to suffer – peacefully." Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X), Message to the Grassroots (1964).

There's a picture of Barack Obama next to one of Jesus in the front window of the small, black art gallery that I drive past almost everyday. And I still see someone wearing an Obama t-shirt maybe once a week, but sometimes it's the same guy. If you're looking, you can a find a variety of shirts in just about every corner store where I live. They're on the wall, next to the Bob Marley, Tupac, Biggie Smalls and Al Pacino "Scarface" t-shirts. You can get an Obama hat and a presidential calendar there too. There are still a few Obama yard signs in the neighborhood, usually in a window. A few people still have an Obama bumper sticker on their cars. Not as many as some might think. Certainly not as many as the number of Confederate flags on vehicles in this part of the country.

Racial solidarity is the mood that helped get Obama into the White House. The traditional source of power and survival among blacks, it is also the novocaine of the moment, a numbing agent as people suffer through what, despite the more hopeful official forecasts, feels like a full-blown depression where I live. The pride is real, but so is the pain, and it's coming in sharp stabs despite the shot. The novocaine is still working, just not so well, and the result is a discomfiting confusion.

In late September I spoke at a "Black Male Summit" about 80 miles northwest of Columbia in Rock Hill, South Carolina, which is famous in civil rights' lore as the first stop in the Deep South for the Freedom Riders testing the 1960 Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation in all interstate public facilities. Rock Hill is where Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist John Lewis and another man stepped off the bus and were beaten by a white mob. The town is mentioned in Chuck Berry's "Promised Land" – only the "poor boy" on the Greyhound is lucky as his bus "bypassed Rock Hill" in the song. Things are still tough in the town just south of Charlotte. Since February of 2008 the number of jobs here has fallen by 15 per cent, and the average salary for people lucky enough to be employed is about $28,000. In June of this year, Yvette Williams, a 15 year-old black girl, was shot and killed by two police officers after she robbed a grocery store. The two officers fired on Williams five times after she pointed a gun at them and refused to drop it, according to Rock Hill Police Chief John Gregory. He said he felt the police response was justified. A witness who lives across the street from where the shooting happened, told the local paper she was in bed when she heard shots and got up, looked out her window and saw the girl fall to the ground. She said she then saw an officer shoot again.

The theme I was asked to speak on in Rock Hill was "How do we restore dignity back to black communities?" My initial response was I didn't know we'd lost it. But I knew the idea was a nod to Obama's

GRAY CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RUDD CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The current anti-war movement's weakness, however, is very much alive in young people's experience. They cite the fact that millions turned out in the streets in the early spring of 2003 to oppose the pending U.S. attack on Iraq, but that these demonstrations had no effect. "We demonstrated, and they didn't listen to us." Even the activists among them became demoralized as numbers at demonstrations dropped off very quickly, street demonstrations becoming cliches, and, despite a big shift in public opinion in 2006, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan droned on to today. The very success of the *spontaneous* early mobilization seems to have contributed to the anti-war movement's long-term weakness.

Something's missing. I first got an insight into articulating what it is when I picked up *Letters from Young Activists: Today's Rebels Speak Out,* edited by Dan Berger, Chesa Boudin and Kenyon Farrow (Nation Books, 2005). Andy Cornell, in a letter to the movement that first radicalized him, "Dear Punk Rock Activism," criticizes the conflation of the terms "activism" and "organizing." He writes, "*activists* are individuals who dedicate their time and energy to various efforts they hope will contribute to social, political, or economic change. *Organizers* are activists who, in addition to their own participation, work to move other people to take action and help them develop skills, political analysis and confidence within the context of organizations. Organizing is a process – creating long-term campaigns that mobilize a certain constituency to press for specific demands from a particular target, using a defined strategy and escalating tactics." In other words, it's not enough for punks to continually express their contempt for mainstream values through their alternate identity; they've got to move toward "organizing masses of people."

Until recently, I'd rarely heard young people call themselves "organizers." The common term for years has been "activists." Organizing was reduced to behind the scenes nuts-and-bolts work.

Aha! Activism = self-expression; organizing = movement-building.

Until recently, I'd rarely heard young people call themselves "organizers." The common term for years has been "activists." Organizing was reduced to the behind the scenes nuts-and-bolts work needed to pull off a specific event, such as a concert or demonstration. But forty years ago, we only used the word "activist" to mock our enemies' view of us, as when a university administrator or newspaper editorial writer would call us "mindless activists." We were organizers, our work was building a mass movement, and that took constant discussion of goals, strategy and tactics (and, later, contributing to our downfall ideology).

Thinking back over my own experience, I realized that I had inherited this organizer's identity from the red diaper babies I fell in with at the Columbia chapter of Students for a Democratic Society, SDS. Raised by parents in the labor and civil rights and communist or socialist movements, they had naturally learned the organizing method as other kids learned how to throw footballs or bake pineapple upside-down cakes. "Build the base!" was the constant strategy of Columbia SDS for years.

Yet, young activists I met were surprised to learn that major events, such as the Columbia rebellion of April 1968, did not happen spontaneously, that they took years of prior education, relationship building, reconsideration on the part of individuals of their role in the institution. I.e., organizing. It seemed to me that they believed that movements happen as a sort of dramatic or spectator sport: after a small group of people express themselves, large numbers of bystanders see the truth in what they're saying and join in. The mass anti-war mobilization of the Spring 2003, which failed to stop the war, was the only model they knew.

I began looking for a literature that would show *how* successful historical movements were built. Not the outcomes or triumphs, such as the great civil rights March on Washington in 1963, but the many streams that eventually created the floods. I wanted to know who said what to whom and how did they respond. One book was recommended to me repeatedly by friends, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* by Charles M. Payne (University of California Press, 1995). Payne, an African-American sociologist, now at the University of Chicago, asked the question how young student organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, had successfully organized voter registration and related campaigns in one town, Greenwood, Mississippi, in the years 1961-1964. The Mississippi Delta region was one of the most benighted areas of the South, with conditions for black cotton sharecroppers and plantation workers not much above the level of slavery. Despite the fact that illiteracy and economic dependency were the norm among black people in the Delta, and that they were the target of years of violent terror tactics, including murder, SNCC miraculously organized these same people to take the steps toward their own freedom, through attaining voting rights and education. How did they do it?

What Payne uncovers through his investigation into SNCC in Greenwood is

CounterPunch

EDITORS
Alexander Cockburn
Jeffrey St. Clair

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Alevtina Rea

BUSINESS
Becky Grant
Deva Wheeler

DESIGN
Tiffany Wardle

COUNSELOR
Ben Sonnenberg

CounterPunch
PO Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558
1-800-840-3683
counterpunch@counterpunch.org
www.counterpunch.org
All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an organizing method that has no name but is solidly rooted in the traditions of church women of the rural South. Black churches usually had charismatic male ministers, who, as a consequence of their positions, led in an authoritarian manner. The work of the congregations themselves, however, the social events and education and mutual aid were organized at the base level by women, who were democratic and relational in style. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Council, SCLC, used the ministerial model in their mobilizing for events, while the young people of SNCC – informed by the teaching and examples of freedom movement veterans Ella Baker and Septima Clark – concentrated on building relationships with local people and helping them develop into leaders within democratic structures. SNCC's central organizing principle," participatory democracy," was a direct inheritance from Ella Baker.

Payne writes, "SNCC preached a gospel of individual efficacy. What you do matters. In order to move politically, people had to believe that. In Greenwood, the movement was able to exploit communal and familial traditions that encouraged people to believe in their own light."

The features of the method, sometimes called "developmental" or "transformational organizing," involve long-term strategy, patient base-building, personal engagement between people, full democratic participation, education and the development of people's leadership capabilities, and coalition-building. The developmental method is often juxtaposed to Alinsky-style organizing, which is usually characterized as top-down and manipulative.

For a first-hand view of Alinsky organizing – though it's never named as such – by a trained and seasoned practitioner, see Barack Obama's book, *Dreams from My Father* (Three Rivers Press, 1995 and 2004). In the middle section of the book, "Chicago," Obama describes his three years organizing on the streets and housing projects of South Chicago. He beautifully invokes his motives – improving young people's lives – but at the same time draws a murky picture of organizing. Questions abound: Who trained him? What was his training? Who paid him? What is the guiding ideology? What is his relationship to the people he calls "my leaders?" Are they above him or are they manipulated by him? Who are calling whose shots? What are the long-term consequences? It's a great piece to start a discussion with young organizers.

While reading *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, I realized that much of what we had practiced in SDS was derived from SNCC and this developmental organizing tradition, up to and including the vision of "participatory democracy," which was incorporated in the 1962 SDS founding document, "The Port Huron Statement.» Columbia SDS's work was patient, strategic, base-building, using both confrontation and education. I, myself, had been nurtured and developed into a leadership position through years of close friendship with older organizers.

We had, in effect, moved backward from organizing to self-expression, believing, ridiculously, that this would build the movement.

However, my clique's downfall came post-1968, when, under the spell of the illusion of revolution, we abandoned organizing, first for militant confrontation (Weatherman and the Days of Rage, Oct. 1969) and then armed urban guerilla warfare (the Weather Underground, 1970-1976). We had, in effect, moved backward from organizing to self-expression, believing, ridiculously, that that would build the movement. At the moment when more organizing was needed to build a permanent anti-imperialist mass movement, we abandoned organizing.

This is the story I tell in my book, *Underground*. It's about good organizing (Columbia), leading to worse (Weatherman), leading to horrible (the Weather Underground). I hope it's useful to contemporary organizers, as they contemplate how to build the coming mass movement(s).

CP

Mark Rudd lives and teaches in Albuquerque, N.M. He can be reached at www.markrudd.com.

The March Into Afghanistan

A Brief Chronology of the Earlier Years

By H. Bruce Franklin

1953: CIA orchestrates overthrow of democratic government of Iran and establishment of military dictatorship under the Shah. The U.S.A. trains and supplies secret police (SAVAK).

1958: U.S.A. plans with Iraq, its main Arab ally in the Middle East (center of the Baghdad Pact), to smash with military force some growing progressive secular forces in the region. Iraq's army is to march through Syria and/or Jordan to link up with U.S. invasion of Lebanon. But the Iraqi army under General Kassem, instead, overthrows the right-wing monarchy in Baghdad and establishes an avowedly socialist government. The same day, U.S. forces invade Lebanon.

1963: CIA and British intelligence help coordinate the overthrow of Kassem's government in Iraq.

April 1978: Progressive secular govern-

FRANKLIN CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

Subscription Information

Subscription information can be found at www.counterpunch.org or call toll-free inside the U.S. 1-800-840-3683

Published twice monthly except July and August, 22 issues a year.

1 year hardcopy edition $45
2 year hardcopy edition $80
1 year email edition $35
2 year email edition $65
1 year email & hardcopy edition $50
1 year institutions/supporters $100
1 year student/low income $35

Renew by telephone, mail or on our website. For mailed orders please include name, address and email address with payment, or call 1-800-840-3683 or 1-707-629 3683. Add $17.50 per year for subscriptions mailed outside the U.S.A.

Make checks or money orders payable to:
CounterPunch
Business Office
PO Box 228, Petrolia, CA 95558

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GRAY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

tough-love trick bag. "Post-racialism" is nonsense, but as an ideological concept it's real, with real political consequences. On the right, it is license for white blowhards to go on any racist tirade they like so long as they don't actually broadcast the word "nigger." In the black community it's alive wherever blacks argue among themselves as to whether they are individually or collectively responsible for the conditions they face, or if they're as criminal or immoral or lazy or violent or promiscuous or stupid as racists believe them to be. Sherman Porterfield, one of the organizers of the event, was quoted in the local paper, "Obama talked about it," this claimed loss of dignity; "he has challenged us. The question now is, are we up to the challenge? Our young people are dropping out of school in record numbers, and it's our fault. Nobody is shooting water hoses at us anymore. But we are allowing our young brothers to shoot each other. And that is not acceptable."

I've known Porterfield since the 1988 Jesse Jackson campaign when he was a car salesman and donated the campaign cars. I like him. As folks say, "his heart is in the right place." Still, I was surprised when he invited me to speak to his group. We've talked politics over the years. Our conversations haven't been discourteous, but we don't always see eye to eye. I've been reluctant to say whether I think Obama is good or bad for black people, but I've always been clear that skin color has never been a sufficient factor for winning my political support. I was antsy about the invite because I didn't want to be put on the hot seat. Race solidarity is a big stumbling block these days. Say the wrong thing and you're called a "hater." But I didn't go to bad-mouth Obama. I went to talk about a different kind of solidarity, one informed by an understanding of the structures that keep people down. I had 45 minutes to speak, followed by a panel consisting of a preacher, school administrator, police chief, two politicians and a government worker.

Before introducing me, Sherman briefly repeated what he said in the newspaper article. The people applauded when he said Obama's name. It wasn't long or raucous, but it governed how I managed my words. I opened with Malcolm's novocaine quote. I was careful. I tried to stay on the economic and social numbers and on how precarious a time it is for blacks. I talked about the unemployed, the dropout rate, and police violence, with the Williams' killing in mind.

The audience was open to what I had to say about the police having too much power. I mentioned how the share of public funds to the police-penal state has nearly doubled as a percentage of civilian government spending over the past 50 years and now stands at 15 per cent of the latter and that we needed to demilitarize the police and end the drug war. I said that I understood why Obama backed off of the "police acted stupidly" in the Henry Louis Gates' affair so as not to sidetrack his health insurance fund-

I've been reluctant to say whether I think Obama is good or bad for black people, but I've always been clear that skin color has never been a sufficient factor for winning my political support.

ing push. But I didn't yield on him being wrong for not supporting free speech or First Amendment rights and the right to be secure in one's home. I reminded the audience that while a disorderly charge is "minor" in that it's only a misdemeanor, many young black, brown and poor whites get their first taste of jail by misuse of the charge.

In the talk I had said that Obama siding with Sgt. James Crowley wasn't as egregious as his Justice Department going before the Supreme Court in May to argue against a 23-year-old precedent for defendants' rights set by *Michigan v. Jackson*. The issue before the Court was whether a defendant who has already been appointed counsel may be interrogated by police without that counsel present. The Justice Department agreed with Justice Antonin Scalia that the *Michigan* restriction "serves no purpose," and the Court ruled by a 5-4 decision that such interrogation was not a violation of a defendant's Sixth Amendment right to counsel. Justice John Paul Stevens, who wrote the 1986 *Michigan* decision, spoke for the dissenters saying, "If a defendant is entitled to protection from police-initiated interrogation under the Sixth Amendment when he merely requests a lawyer, he is even more obviously entitled to such protection when he has secured a lawyer."

I addressed Porterfield's assertion that "our young people are dropping out of school in record numbers, and it's our fault." In South Carolina, according to the State Legislative Black Caucus, only three out of ten black males and four out of ten black females graduate from high school, but pick just about any state or locale, and the black and brown graduation rates are low and the dropout rates are high. So, people can believe either that most of their kids are stupid or that something's wrong with an educational system with such a high failure rate and so much flim-flam around school reform.

In South Carolina, Democrat Robert Ford has made school reform his marquee issue in preparing to run for governor next year. This past year Ford offered a bill in the General Assembly that would make uttering profanity in public — whether in writing or orally — a felony and another bill that would require South Carolina cities and counties to give their workers a paid day off for Confederate Memorial Day or lose millions in state funds. Now he's pushing charter schools although it is unclear what his plan is or if he has one. Many believe he's in it for the money. He's allied with Al Sharpton who jumped aboard the corporate education reform gravy train after receiving a half million dollars last year for his National Action Network, reportedly brokered by New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein through a right-wing non-profit agency that promotes charter schools. I mentioned the president's friend and fellow Chicagoan, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who tried out his experiments in reform first on public school students in Chicago, where he was a CEO of Chicago Public Schools. Duncan militarized and corporatized the third largest school system in the nation, vastly expanded draconian student expulsions, instituted sweeping surveillance practices, advocated a growing police presence in the schools, arbitrarily shut down entire schools and fired entire school staffs. As a result Chicago's public schools are now being sued by black teachers for racial discrimination over the dismissal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of hundreds of qualified black teachers, replaced with younger, cheaper, less experienced and mostly whiter ones. And, some suggest that his charter schools plan has led to a spike in violence. Yet the Obama administration is withholding federal education funds from states and school districts to force nationwide implementation of Duncan's charter school model.

The audience nodded approval when I warned them to be on the lookout for politicians who could make things worse by offering nothing but a flimsy promise of something better. They gave a start when I said I hoped Joe Wilson was right in calling Obama a liar after the president said that improvements in the health care system would not apply to undocumented immigrants. It was a church-going crowd so I quickly followed with the story of the Good Samaritan and said a Christian is bound to give aid or health care to the stranger or immigrant. They also nodded in agreement when I said that Jimmy Carter, an 85-year-old white Southerner knew more about how white Southerners feel, think or believe than the son of a white woman from Kansas and a black man from Kenya who was raised in Hawai'i and Indonesia. And maybe many of them, raised in the South, in a state that honors the Confederate flag, did too.

When it was the panelists' turn, the youth jobs coordinator said he sent kids home even before he interviewed them if they exhibited behavior that he didn't like, such as talking in the waiting room or wearing saggy pants. They're probably the kids that need help the most, I thought, but he said he told them "to go home and ask your mother why you didn't get in the program." The school administrator favored Obama's charter school approach. The cop talked about "weed and seed," a 1980s-vintage federal program that aims to weed out the bad elements in a neighborhood via police power and community collaboration, although I'm still unsure what type of seeding comes after other than federal dollars. The politicians didn't have much to offer. The preacher had the last word. He was on the defensive about what the church was or wasn't doing in the community these days, and reiterated the need for black men "to be responsible."

I had concluded my rap, saying black politics was about more than just one person, whether that be the man on the street or the man in the White House. That blacks should treat Obama as they would any other person in power. And that it doesn't help them, or him, to stand down, back up or hush up. They had to give him some backbone.

Doubtless, most blacks never expected Obama to take racism and its material effects head on. I keep hearing, "We know he can't say everything that's on his mind," or "He's doing the best he can under the circumstances" – those "circumstances" being white people. That's usually followed by "if you can't say something good, don't say anything at all." I was talking about how subdued blacks seem to be with a friend who works in a university office where there are few other blacks. I had to listen hard as she whispered into the phone: "You know how they [whites] are. They think we can't do anything. To them there's always something wrong with us even when it's not evident or even there. So when they tear him [Obama] down, they are really tearing all of us down. So we got to stand behind the brother."

The city of Columbia used stimulus money to purchase more than "3,500 made in China or Korea tasers" for police and to hire more officers.

Many blacks, regardless of class, see themselves and their aspirations in Obama. The threats against his life only strengthen that support. Their enthusiasm may also reflect an optimism that the nation is on the way to becoming a less racist and fairer one. It seems that black middle class support is tied in with their societal role as control agents and their illusions of being part of what W.E.B. Dubois called "the talented tenth." The black bourgeoisie wants acceptance by whites and Obama represents this acceptance. For others, his "just not embarrassing black folk" is enough. So folk just cross their fingers in hopes that even though he may never openly express it, he understands what white entitlement and racism is all about.

At a conference in Atlanta of Sharpton's National Action Network this summer, John Silvanus Wilson, the executive director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), was urging his audience simply to believe. Obama has "top notch blacks" in his administration who "would do what they could" to help financially struggling black colleges, Wilson told the group, but people had to "chill out" and "give them time." He warned that schools ought not expect the government to be enthused about helping them "if their alumni weren't giving to the schools." That sounds reasonable if one ignores the reality that many former HBCU students are strapped for years after graduation paying back loans at a higher interest rate than the bank that received government bailout money have to pay back. Before ending his talk Wilson asked for "patience," urging the audience to "crush the haters" who would challenge the pace of the administration in addressing black concerns.

Yet that silence has allowed Obama to get away with not saying or doing anything that would appear to favor black interest, and doing things against their interest, like bailing out Wall Street fat cats while everyday people are cast adrift, and saying things to and about black people that a white person couldn't say without challenge or scorn, things he'd dare not say to any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. As much as some people might like to believe the post-racial storyline of Obama, the side effect is that he becomes the substitute for real structural progress, and blacks are left to suck it up and either pretend racism isn't what it is or question their understanding of what it is.

All of this has put people in an awkward bind, knowing things aren't right but trying to justify their loyalty anyway. In the 1998 movie *Primary Colors*, based on the first presidential bid of Bill Clinton, campaign manager Henry Burton is confronted by his ex-girlfriend demanding to know why he was working for someone she considered to be just another unprincipled politician. Henry responds, "I can tell the difference between a man who believes what I believe and lies to get elected, and a man who just doesn't give a f***. And I'll take the liar."

If only it were that simple.

For me, what is simple is that Obama hasn't had to offer much to get and keep black support, so he hasn't. And,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he hasn't had to lie about it. At a June 23rd press conference, a black reporter asked Obama what he intended to do in the face of reports that the African-American unemployment rate will go to 20 per cent or more by the end of this year. The reporter asked, "Why not target intervention now to stop the bloodletting in the black unemployment rate?" Obama offered trickle-down economics saying, "The best thing that I can do for the African-American community or the Latino community or the Asian community, whatever community, is to get the economy as a whole moving." It was as though the unemployed were not part of the "whole" that needs to get "moving."

Unemployment among blacks was high before Obama took office. For blacks in the 16-24 age group it's been double-digit unemployment for decades. Nevertheless, in the time between George W. Bush's relocation back to Texas and Obama's move into the White House, the unemployment rates for the parents of many of those unemployed youth nearly doubled. As of September, the "official" Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows the overall black unemployment rate at 15.4 per cent: 16.5 per cent for adult men, 12.5 for adult women and 40.8 per cent for teenagers. Some economists estimate that the actual overall rate is in the 27 to 30 per cent range, with the "unofficial" teenage rate far surpassing the 50 per cent mark. Perhaps, the only uptick in young black male employment in the last year has been in illicit drug sales.

By any economic measure the black community is in a severe depression. African Americans make up about 13 per cent of the population but represent 17 per cent of the uninsured. Nearly 25 per cent of blacks, or 9.4 million people, lived in poverty in the United States in 2008, compared with 8.6 per cent of whites, or 17 million people. Of the 2.3 million people in jail or prison, half are black. Among black women ages 35 to 39, one in 100 is behind bars, compared with one in 355 for white women in the same age group. Yet no targeted youth or adult jobs program was part of the $787 billion stimulus package. The most that the jobless got out the stimulus deal was extension of unemployment benefits, if they hadn't already dropped off the rolls. At best, stimulus dollars forestalled some teachers being laid off and kept road crews working. If hiring more cops is a good thing, the bill did that as well. Yet, unless the parents of those unemployed young people were fortunate enough to have a public works job, many were facing foreclosure and other financial woes.

Obama is not the culprit for the crisis in black homeownership. There have been big problems for a very long time. According to the NAACP, before the current foreclosures wave, African Americans had a homeowners' rate of 47.2 per cent, compared with 75.2 per cent for whites. Between 2004 and 2007 the black home ownership rate declined by nearly two percentage points. According to the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act database, minorities got half the subprime loans (for home purchases and refinancings) handed out in the big years of 2004-07. Mortgage dollars (prime and subprime) for home purchases loaned to blacks went up 397 per cent from 1999 to 2006, compared with 100 per cent for whites. (It was a staggering 691 per cent for Hispanics.) The housing market meltdown only speeded up the process of people losing the homes they had only a 50-50 chance of keeping within the first seven years anyway.

Nearly 25 per cent of blacks, or 9.4 million people, lived in poverty in the United States in 2008, compared with 8.6 per cent of whites, or 17 million people.

Adding to their woes, those targeted for subprime loans are "redlined" for high interest rates for just about every financial product that the law requires them to have, like home and auto insurance on the cars they purchased via "predatory," albeit "voluntary" consumer loans. Then, when they fall into foreclosure, the cost of everything goes up because of their diminishing Beacon score or worsening credit status. It's the ghetto adage: "The po' pay mo'." This is why 75 per cent of homeowners in foreclosure end up losing their homes.

Homeownership advocates have pleaded for a federal foreclosures moratorium in a vocal way for three or four years. They were loud enough during the 2008 primaries for Hillary Clinton to make a moratorium part of her campaign platform to try to woo black voters away from Obama. Yet even as those voters rejected Clinton, there was no hint Obama would help black homeowners with credit problems associated with being in bankruptcy and/or foreclosure. He was deaf to those who got played by a tilted set of rules and were left with bad or worse credit, saying, "We will help those with good credit who played by the rules."

Upon entering office Obama declared, "I won't stop until all responsible homeowners can stay in their homes." He offered $75 billion in incentives to lenders to reduce loan payments for troubled borrowers with the "goal of preventing up to four million foreclosures", just as the Mortgage Bankers Association reported that, in the first three months of 2009, about 5.4 million mortgages were delinquent or in some stage of foreclosure and it was going to get worse. But the lenders didn't extend the money to people they still regarded as bad risks. Lower interest rates alone could not help struggling homeowners, who needed a meaningful "time out" to regroup financially and mentally from the stress on being on the bubble.

A few banks, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Morgan Stanley and Wells Fargo, all initiated short-term foreclosure moratoriums and voluntary loan modifications prior to the White House plan. Some say they did it to blur notice of their prior lending practices while waiting to get their take of the $700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) money. Almost every bank mentioned is being sued either by investors or consumers over their behavior in the subprime-lending debacle and/or for discriminatory lending practices.

Now it appears that Obama's anti-foreclosure plan has had little meaningful effect on the homeowners' crisis, given the additional fuel of growing unemployment.

From March to June, a little more than 100,000 homeowners had been offered loan modifications, according to the Treasury Department. The lion's share of initial assistance went to home-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

owners at the high end of the income ladder. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of distressed moderate and low-income homeowners stood in line outside sporting arenas and civic centers across the country hoping to get what help they could from advocacy groups like the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America. NACA did a ten-city tour and estimated it helped 180,000 participants and "successfully renegotiated loan agreements for 1 out of 3 troubled mortgagers."

By the end of August 360,165 loans had been modified, but in July alone RealtyTrac reported 360,149 foreclosures, which means one month's foreclosures wiped away the cumulative gains since March.

Obama's $787 billion stimulus plan didn't much help homeowners in distress. Most local and state governments used the money to cover deficits in their operating budgets to include ongoing downtown development to shore up the local commercial market, highway projects, and sustaining ongoing gentrification projects, which is how many of the people struggling in subprime housing developments got there in the first place. The funds also allowed local government to suspend or reduce developers' taxes on repossessed houses or vacant properties in areas of overdevelopment. It bailed out the developers and the banks that loaned them the money to throw up all those subprime developments by giving local governments the funds to buy their foreclosed properties.

The city of Columbia used stimulus money to purchase more than "3,500 made in China or Korea tasers," since that is where they come from, for police and to hire more officers, ostensibly to ramp up their drug war and gang suppression activities. Around the time of the Gates controversy, a young man in an adjoining neighborhood who alleges that county police were "planting drugs" on folk stopped me on the street to describe how local sheriff's deputies swooped down en masse on an area of alleged drug activity with guns and cameras. They weren't there just to make arrests; they also took individual snapshots of people they didn't arrest. Whoever refused to be photographed was charged with disorderly conduct and arrested. He said he was arrested and was tased three times, yet he faced charges for assaulting an officer as he was twitching on the ground. "They tell us that we got nobody on our side to speak for us. And they're right," he said.

The Gates episode and the Obama Justice Department taking sides against the rights of the accused may be signs of things to come in the face of rising unemployment and folks losing their homes by the millions. It leaves those under the gun with fewer rights the law is bound to respect and little or no recourse to complain.

So as wealth, poverty, education and health disparities between blacks and whites grow wider, and as the number of black homeless, jobless and incarcerated increases, there is a host of questions blacks need to find answers to and act on. How do they pursue a political agenda, recognizing that Obama is not the "president of black America" and is unwilling to go to the mat for black Americans or any really progressive policies? What is the change they need, and who leads the fight? The Congressional Black Caucus and its individual members have very little stroke outside of their corporate-sponsored CBC weekend. Civil rights leaders and organizations have become slaves to Wall Street and corporate America or are old and out of touch. What does the community do about that, and about the black press, now reduced to offering "great man" coverage week after week with little, if any, critical assessment of what is or isn't being done by the Democratic president? When does it stop just being about Obama and solidarity for the sake of the symbolic?

How do they pursue a political agenda recognizing that Obama is not the "president of black America" and is unwilling to go to the mat for black Americans or any really progressive policies?

It's a safe bet that despite it all, Obama would hold on to overwhelming black support when re-election time rolls around. Yet blacks cannot hope to progress if they continue to miss, endure, ignore and maybe even accept the institutional denial of their real life experiences and a very real retreat from defense of some basic civil rights for solidarity's sake. They can oppose the organized forces of white supremacy and the racist outlook validated by post-racialism, but they can't feel sorry for Obama; he volunteered.

Princeton University Professor Cornel West, speaking after another of Obama's "tough-love" speeches remarked, "I would rather be in a crack house than a White House that promotes neoimperial policies abroad and neoliberal policies at home." When asked to explain himself West said, "Because in a crack house, at least I'm in solidarity with folk who are sensitive to a pain. It's just that they have the wrong response to their pain. Instead of being in a crack house, they ought to be organizing. But they're dealing with their suffering. They're just dealing with it in the wrong way. The White House is escaping from the suffering."

It used to be that the black community operated on a certain ethos – that the system was rotten and needed changing – and that the idea that people were oppressed, killed, wronged because of their race or some other factor not of their control or making was wrong. At this point in time blacks can't worry about those freaking out because they are losing their sense of entitlement and privilege and it all coming apart for them. Blacks must continue to take on empire, pull it apart and build something else. On a more everyday way, in order to survive without violence being inflicted among us and against us, we must build a community-based economy. And we can't back down on what we are trying to accomplish – a more civilized, humane and sustainable society. And if Obama is not part of the solution, he's part of the problem. Right now, he's the latter. And he better look out if the novocaine wears off. **CP**

Kevin Alexander Gray is a civil rights organizer in South Carolina. His book, *Waiting for Lightning to Strike*, is published by CounterPunch/AK Press. He can be reached at kagamba@bellsouth.net.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CounterPunch
PO Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558

Phone 1-800-840-3683 or visit our website to find out about CounterPunch's latest books or to order a t-shirt for summer!

1st Class
Presort
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 269
Skokie, IL

First Class

return service requested

ment seizes power in Afghanistan. It decrees universal education for women and bans child marriage. These measures help spark fundamentalist revolt.

February 1979: Shah of Iran is overthrown by coalition of democratic and fundamentalist forces. Fundamentalist government is established.

March 1979: U.S.A. plans with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China to arm, train, and organize fundamentalist "mujahedeen" and warlords in Afghanistan to overthrow government and attempt to lure Soviet Union into combat.

July 1979: Saddam Hussein seizes power and begins thorough purge of leftists.

December 1979: After repeated requests for assistance from government in Afghanistan, Soviet Union sends forces to fight against the rebellion by fundamentalists and warlords.

September 1980: Saddam Hussein, with support from Washington, begins massive invasion of western Iran.

1979-1992: Full-scale war in Afghanistan. On one side are successive Afghan governments and Soviet forces, opposed by the "mujahedeen" and various warlords (later to be known as the Northern Alliance). The CIA, working with ISI (its Pakistan counterpart), trains and equips the fundamentalists and allied warlords. The CIA spends between 4 and 5 billion dollars, making this its largest operation. Major funding also comes from Saudi Arabia. China and Iran also provide weapons and funding. The world's largest opium-growing operation is established in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, replacing the Golden Triangle (in Laos, Thailand, and Burma), lost to the CIA with U.S. defeat in Vietnam. Soviet forces withdraw in 1989. Yet, the United States and Pakistan continue to supply advanced weapons and financing to the fundamentalists and warlords. But the government is not defeated until1992, three years after the last Soviet troops have left. In 1993, terrorists detonated a huge bomb under the World Trade Center.

1980-1988: Iran-Iraq war. The U.S.A. supports Saddam Hussein with weapons, intelligence, and "dual-use" technology.

1991: War against Iraq begins as the "Persian Gulf War." Bombing of Iraq by U.S. and British warplanes continues intermittently up to the full-scale U.S.-British invasion of 2003.

1992-1996: The triumphant government of warlords and "mujahedeen" in Afghanistan loots Kabul and the countryside. ISI in Pakistan organizes the Taliban (literally, "religious students") as new army, which invades Afghanistan and seizes power.

1996-2002: Intermittent civil war between Taliban government and the former government forces, mainly consisting of the "Northern Alliance," a loose, shifting confederation of warlords and their "mujahedeen."

1998: U.S. cruise missiles strike Kabul.

May 2001: The Bush administration gives 43 million dollars to the Taliban.

2001: Al-Qaeda develops plan to lure the United States into a ground war in Afghanistan. As a precondition, they plan to assassinate Ahmad Masood, the military and political leader of the Northern Alliance, in order to neutralize that force.

September 9: Al-Qaeda suicide bombers kill Ahmad Masood, thus initiating the action part of the plan. The next action part of the plan is executed on September 11.

CP

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED